

AN EXHORTATION TO PENITENCE

[There is an autograph manuscript of undetermined date.

Orations of this sort, before religious companies, were common in Florence.¹ In 1495 Machiavelli became a member of the Company of Piety.² To the Company of Charity, Pope Clement VII in 1523 directed a Brief;³ for that fraternity Machiavelli's oration, in its praise of charity, would have been especially suitable.

Part of the oration is conventional in lauding the outward signs of penitence, even in taking as models the saints who inflicted on themselves bodily pain. Machiavelli may have accepted these things as normal without much consideration, or he may have been ironical in a way apparent to few hearers or later readers. At least, he characteristically declares weeping not enough; action is necessary. Similarly he said in *THE PRINCE* that the sins of the Italians were not those charged by the preachers, but such ones as reliance on mercenary soldiers. Even the instruments of self-chastisement used by the saints immediately become allegories for good deeds directed against conduct injurious to one's fellows. Machiavelli's friend Vettori stated thus his view of religion:

The theologians are the chief ones of our religion who have made and continue making so many books, so many debates, so many syllogisms, so many clever doctrines that they fill not merely the libraries but the shops of the booksellers. Nevertheless, our Savior Jesus Christ says in the Gospel: "You shall love God your Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your spirit, and your neighbor as yourself; in these two precepts are summed up all the laws and the prophets." What need is there then for debates about the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Resurrection, the Eucharist?

This or an even simpler religion is that of Machiavelli. In his letters especially there are frequent and apparently spontaneous references to God. But always he considers what religion will do for one's neighbors, as when in *THE*

1. Tommasini, *VITA DI MACHIAVELLI*, 2. 734.

2. *Ibid.*, 386.

3. *Ibid.*, 734.

ART OF WAR he attributes much of the wickedness of mercenary troops to lack of religion, and makes the soldier who serves society a religious man. In the HISTORY OF FLORENCE, in his account of a violent storm as a divine warning, occurs the harmonious reverse of his suggestion in this little work that the goodness of God is shown in providing the world for the happiness of man.]

“From the depths I have called upon you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice” (Psalm 130).

SINCE THIS EVENING, HONORED FATHERS AND SUPERIOR Brothers, I am to speak to Your Charities, in order to obey my superiors, and am to say something on penitence, it has seemed to me good to begin my exhortation with words of that teacher of the Holy Spirit, David the Prophet, so that those who have sinned with him may, according to his words, hope they can receive mercy from God all-powerful and all-merciful. And that they can obtain it, since David obtained it, they should not fear, because neither greater transgression nor greater penitence for a man than in his instance can be conceived, nor in God can greater generosity to pardon be found. And therefore with the words of the Prophet we shall say: “O Lord, I, imprisoned in the depths of sin, with a voice humble and full of tears have called upon you, O Lord, for mercy; and I pray you that in your infinite goodness you may be willing to grant it to me.” There should be no one, then, who should despair of obtaining it, if only with eyes full of tears, with distressed heart, with sad voice he asks for it. O immense pity of God! O boundless goodness! It was known to the most high God how easy it was for man to rush into sin; he saw that, if he had to endure the harshness of vengeance, it was impossible that any man should be saved; he could not with a more merciful remedy provide against human frailty than by admonishing the human race that not sin but persistence in sin could make him unforgiving; and therefore he opened to men the way of penitence so that, having lost the other way, they could by it rise to heaven.

Penitence therefore is the only means for annulling all the ills, all the sins of men, which, though they are many and in many and various ways are committed, nonetheless for the most part can be

divided into two groups: one is to be ungrateful to God, the second is to be unfriendly to one's neighbor.

But in order to realize our ingratitude, it is necessary to consider how many and of what sort are the benefits we have received from God. Consider, then, how all things made and created are made and created for the benefit of man. You see first of all the huge extent of the land, which, in order that it could be inhabited by men, he did not allow to be wholly covered over with water but left in part exposed for their use. Then he made to grow on it so many animals, so many plants, so many grasses, and whatever upon it is produced, for their benefit; and not merely did he wish that the earth should provide for their living, but commanded the waters also to support countless animals for their food.

But let us leave these earthly things; let us raise our eyes to the sky; let us consider the beauty of the things we see. Of these, part he has made for our use, part in order that, as we observe the glory and the marvelous workmanship of these things, upon us may come a thirst and a longing to possess those other things that are hidden from us. Do you not see how much toil the sun undertakes, to cause us to share in his light, to cause to live, through his energy, both ourselves and those things that have been created by God for us? So every object is created for the glory and good of man, and man is alone in being created for the good and glory of God, who gave him speech that he might praise him, gave him sight, turned not to the ground as for the other animals but turned to the sky, in order that he might always see it, gave him hands in order that he might build temples, offer sacrifices in His honor, gave him reason and intellect in order that he might consider and understand the greatness of God. See, then, with how much ingratitude man rises against such a great benefactor! And how much punishment he deserves when he perverts the use of these things and turns them toward evil! That tongue made to glorify God blasphemes him; that mouth, through which he must be fed, he makes into a sewer and a way for satisfying the appetite and the belly with luxurious and excessive food; those thoughts about God he changes into thoughts about the world; that desire to preserve the human species turns into lust and many other dissipations. Thus with these brutish deeds man changes himself from a rational animal into a brute animal. Man changes, therefore,

by practicing this ingratitude to God, from angel to devil, from master to servant, from man to beast.

These who are ungrateful to God—it is impossible that they are not unfriendly to their neighbors. Those are unfriendly to their neighbors who are without charity. This, my Fathers and Brothers, is the only thing that takes our souls to Heaven; this is the only thing that has more worth than all the other virtues of men; this is that of which the Church says at such length that he who does not have charity does not have anything. Of this Saint Paul says: “If I speak with all the tongues of men and of angels, and do not have charity, I am just like a worthless musical instrument.”⁴ On this is based the Christian faith. He cannot be full of charity who is not full of religion, because charity is patient, is kindly, is not envious, is not perverse, does not show pride, is not ambitious,⁵ does not seek her own profit, does not get angry, meditates on the wicked man, does not delight in him, does not take pleasure in vanity, suffers everything, believes everything, hopes everything. Oh divine virtue! Oh, happy are those that possess you! This is that heavenly garment in which we must be clad if we are to be admitted to the celestial marriage feast of our Emperor Jesus Christ in the heavenly kingdom! This is that in which we must be dressed if we are not to be driven from the banquet and put in the everlasting fire! Whoever, then, lacks it must necessarily be unfriendly to his neighbor: he does not aid him, he does not endure his faults, he does not console him in tribulation, he does not teach the ignorant, he does not advise him who errs, he does not help the good, he does not punish the evil. These offenses against one’s neighbor are grave; ingratitude against God is very grave.

Because into these two vices we often fall, God the gracious creator has showed us the way for raising ourselves up, which is penitence. The might of this he has shown with his works and his words: with words when he commanded Saint Peter to forgive seventy times seven in one day the man who asked forgiveness from him; with his works when he forgave David for his adultery and murder, and Saint Peter for the offense of having denied him not once but three times. What sin will God not forgive you, my

4. A translation of Machiavelli’s Italian rendering of the Latin Bible, I Corinthians 13:1.

5. I Corinthians 13:4-7. The word ambitious does not occur in the English version. For its importance to Machiavelli, see his TERCETS ON AMBITION.

brothers, if you sincerely resort to penitence, since he forgave these to them? And not merely did he forgive them, but he honored them among the highest of those chosen in heaven; merely because David, prostrate on the earth, full of affliction and of tears, cried out: "Pity me, God"; merely because Saint Peter without ceasing wept bitterly for his sin. David wept for his. They deserved, both of them, forgiveness.

But, because it is not enough to repent and to weep (for it is necessary to prepare oneself by means of the actions opposed to the sin), in order not to sin further, to take away opportunity for evil, one must imitate Saint Francis and Saint Jerome; they, in order to restrain the flesh and take from it means for forcing them into sinful deeds, would, one of them, roll himself in thorns, the other with a stone would tear his breast. But with what stones or what thorns shall we keep down our appetite for usury, for slander, for deceptions practiced against our neighbor, if not with alms and with honoring him and doing good to him? But we are deceived by lust, involved in transgressions, and enmeshed by the snares of sin; and we fall into the power of the Devil. Hence, to get out of it, we must resort to penitence and cry out with David: "Have mercy upon me, oh God!" and with Saint Peter weep bitterly, and for all the misdeeds we have committed feel shame

And repent and understand clearly
that as much as pleases the world is a short dream.⁶

6. *Petrarch*, SONNET 1.